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November 14, 1962

TO : The Under Secretary.  
THROUGH: S/S  
FROM : IKR - Roger Hilsman

SUBJECT: Talking Paper: Probable Soviet Motivations in  
Deploying Strategic Missiles to Cuba

1. The Soviet attempt to deploy MRBMs and IRBMs in Cuba remains a startling venture. The Soviets had never undertaken foreign deployments of such weapons before; when they chose to do so they picked the least stable and reliable of their associates as the host country, one, moreover, with extremely insecure lines of communication. Furthermore, Cuba's proximity to the US made the deployment clearly provocative.

2. The Soviet decision could thus hardly have been a frivolous one. Nor does a mere Cuban request for protection (the official Soviet explanation) seem like an adequate explanation.

3. The basic impulse leading the Soviets to consider the move probably stemmed from developments in the US-Soviet strategic relationship twelve to eighteen months ago. At some time in that period, the Soviets became aware that the US had changed its view of the military balance, i.e., that the presumption of a significant Soviet superiority in ICBMs was giving way to a recognition that, if anything, a "missile gap" existed in favor of the US rather than vice-versa. Combined with this Soviet awareness that the US had revised its estimate of the numerical balance, it must also have dawned on the Soviet leaders that their call of secrecy had been penetrated, that the location of their strategic striking power was generally known to the US and that in consequence the invulnerability which secrecy had conferred on the early-generation Soviet missile force was fast disappearing.

4. These realizations undoubtedly led the Soviet leaders to reconsider their missile posture and confronted them once again with acute problems of resource allocation.

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5. In this situation, Moscow found itself with a new ally in Cuba. Almost certainly the Soviet leaders had many misgivings about Castro and about the way he had read himself into the Communist camp. But if he could be co-opted and built up, he would represent a potentially valuable bridgehead in the Western hemisphere -- a bridgehead both of revolution and possibly of physical Soviet power.

6. The possibility that Cuba might serve in some fashion to redress the strategic equation, at least in some measure, must thus have exercised increasing attraction in Soviet minds. And Castro himself probably pushed the Soviets further along in these reflections as with mounting insistence he asked for military assistance and showed himself willing to become a host to the Soviets.

7. The Soviets undoubtedly considered the risks; but the vistas opened by the successful transformation of Cuba into a Soviet strategic base were lush and full of promise.

-- There was (a) the purely military gain of being able to bring virtually all of the US and large parts of Latin America under Soviet nuclear fire -- not enough, it is true, to reverse the military balance but sufficient, nonetheless, to add substantial weight to a Soviet strike, to release Soviet ICBMs and submarine-launched missiles for other missions, and to complicate US defensive as well as offensive problems.

-- There was (b) the broader strategic sales floor of a firm demonstration of Soviet ability to add weight such a quantum leap right to the doorstep of the US hemisphere.

-- There was (c) the new strength conferred on Soviet political-diplomatic initiatives via a new ally, not least with respect to Berlin.

-- And finally there was (d) the specific threat in Latin America where, in the Soviet view at least, there would be bound to be a sharp decline in US influence and power, increasing filtration with non-alignment and, in time, other regimes looking to Moscow for support and assistance.

8. Meanwhile, drastic new missile building and developmental projects placed on the agenda by the disappearance of the "missile gap" and by the cancellation of Soviet reduction, right to zero, action, at least, less drastic.

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9. When the decision to attempt the move crystallized in the Soviet mind is difficult to determine. In the spring of 1962, at any rate, Khrushchev clearly decided to build up the air and coastal defenses of Cuba both in order to secure it, at least relatively, against US attack and to test US reactions. By mid or late summer, the Soviets may well have felt able to make their big move and to set in train the massive logistic apparatus required and the preparation of the ground in Cuba.

10. What US reaction did the Soviets expect? In the first place, it must be assumed that Moscow expected that at some point the US would discover what was afoot -- probably before all missiles were operational. (In view of the probable operational date of the IRBMs sometime in December it must be assumed as virtually certain that Moscow expected to be discovered well before the entire force was ready, although the Soviets of course would have preferred to face the US with an accomplished fact.)

11. Once discovered, the Soviets probably calculated that four broad US responses could occur:

- (a) protests, complaints in the UN but, finally acquiescence;
- (b) an effort to offer an attractive bargain involving parts of the US overseas base structure;
- (c) application of limited force combined with a willingness to negotiate a reasonable (from the Soviet point of view) point an indifferent) bargain;
- (d) application of major force against the missiles and/or Cuba as a whole.

12. (a) and (b) above were almost certainly the responses considered most likely by the Soviets. Had they thought either (c) or (d) probable it would seem extremely doubtful that they would have undertaken the venture in the first place because (taking response (c)) they must have recognized that they could neither militarily repulse the air or the missile attack against a decisive US attack, nor keep even the sea and air lanes in the face of a US blockade, nor fight a general war and hope to win. It has sometimes been suggested that the Soviets would have been willing to trade Cuba for the obsequy which the US would earn were it to invade and crush Cuba. In an extreme case, the Soviets might find it necessary

to accept such a trade; but they would hardly base a course of action on the expectation. To the Soviets, at any rate, territory remains a more valuable asset than does the ethnic bal population. And it is extremely doubtful (taking response (c) that the Soviets would have taken the trouble and risk of placing missiles in Cuba had they thought the most likely outcome was that they would have to pull them out again for slight compensation.

12. Surrendering. Even in the first instance of military-strategic decision-making, the missile move into Cuba offered to the Soviets glittering prospects in the strategic, political and psychological realms and at least a participation of new and important economic decisions. They probably thought they could get away with the action or would at least be able to trade the missiles for a substantial portion of the Eastern military position. They probably considered less favorable outcomes but must always have been clear that they could win neither local nor general military action. But they evidently thought that such extrication would not have to be faced -- and they miscalculated.

November 14, 1962

TO: The Under Secretary  
THROUGH: S/S  
FROM: INR - Roger Hilsman

SUBJECT: Talking Paper: Probable Soviet Motivations in  
Deploying Strategic Missiles to Cuba

1. The Soviet attempt to deploy MRBMs and IRBMs in Cuba remains a startling venture: The Soviets had never undertaken foreign deployments of such weapons before; when they chose to do so they picked the least stable and reliable of their associates as the host country, one, moreover, with extremely insecure lines of communication. Furthermore, Cuba's proximity to the US made the deployment clearly provocative.

2. The Soviet decision could thus hardly have been a frivolous one. Nor does a mere Cuban request for protection (the official Soviet explanation) seem like an adequate explanation.

3. The basic impulse leading the Soviets to consider the move probably stemmed from developments in the US-Soviet strategic relationship twelve to eighteen months ago. At some time in that period, the Soviets became aware that the U.S. had changed its view of the military balance, i.e. that the presumption of a significant Soviet superiority in ICBMs was giving way to a recognition that, if anything, a missile gap existed in favor of the US rather than vice-versa. Combined with this Soviet awareness that the US had revised its estimate of the numerical balance, it must also have dawned on the Soviet leaders that their wall of secrecy had been penetrated, that the location of their strategic striking power was generally known to the US and that in consequence the invulnerability which secrecy had conferred on the early-generation Soviet missile force was fast disappearing.

4. These realizations undoubtedly led the Soviet leaders to reconsider their missile programs and confronted them once again with acute problems of resource allocation.

5. In this situation, Moscow found itself with a new ally in Cuba. Almost certainly the Soviet leaders had many misgivings about Castro and about the way he had read himself into the Communist camp. But if he could be maintained and built-up, he would represent a potentially valuable bridge-head in the Western hemisphere -- a bridge-head both of revolution and possibly of physical Soviet power.

6. The possibility that Cuba might serve in some fashion to redress the strategic equation, at least in some measure, must thus have exercised increasing attraction in Soviet minds. And Castro himself probably pushed the Soviets further along in these reflections as with mounting insistence he asked for military assistance and showed himself willing to become a host to the Soviets.

7. The Soviets undoubtedly considered the risks; but the vistas opened by the successful transformation of Cuba into a Soviet strategic base were lush and full of promise.

-- There was (a) the purely military gain of being able to bring virtually all of the US and large parts of Latin America under Soviet nuclear fire -- not enough, it is true, to reverse the military balance, but sufficient, nonetheless, to add substantial weight to a Soviet strike, to release Soviet ICBMs and submarine-launched missiles for other missions, and to complicate US defensive as well as offensive problems.

-- There were (b) the broader strategic gains flowing from a demonstration of Soviet ability to accomplish such a quantum leap right to the doorstep of the US metropole.

-- There was (c) the new strength conferred on Soviet political-diplomatic initiatives vis-a-vis the West, not least with respect to Berlin.

-- And finally there was (d) the specific impact in Latin America where, in the Soviet view at least, there would be bound to be a sharp decline in US influence and power, increasing attraction with non-alignment and, in time, other regimes looking to Moscow for support and association.

8. Meanwhile, drastic new missile building and developmental programs placed on the agenda by the disappearance of the missile gap and by the puncturing of Soviet seclusion, might be postponed or, at least, kept less drastic.

9. When the decision to attempt the move crystallized in the Soviet mind is difficult to determine. In the spring of 1962, at any rate, Moscow clearly decided to build up the air and coastal defenses of Cuba both in order to secure it, at least relatively, against US attack and to test US reactions. By mid or late summer, the Soviets may well have felt able to make their big move and set in train the massive logistical apparatus required and the preparation of the ground in Cuba.

10. What US reaction did the Soviets expect? In the first place, it must be assumed that Moscow expected that at some point the US would discover what was afoot -- probably before all the missiles were operational. (In view of the probable operation date of the IRBMs sometime in December it must be assumed as virtually certain that Moscow expected to be discovered well before the entire force was ready, although the Soviets of course would have preferred to face the US with an accomplished fact.)

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would hardly base a course of action on the expectation. To the Soviets, at any rate, territory remains a more valuable asset than someone else's bad reputation. And it is extremely doubtful (taking response (c)) that the Soviets would have taken the trouble and risk of placing missiles in Cuba had they thought the most likely outcome was that they would have to pull them out again for slight compensation.

13. Summation. Born is the first instance of military-strategic considerations, the missile move into Cuba offered to the Soviets glittering prospects in the strategic, political and psychological realms and at least a postponement of new and repugnant economic decisions. They probably thought they could get away with the action or at least be able to trade the missiles for substantial portion of the Western military position. They probably considered less favorable outcomes and must always have been clear that they could win neither local nor general military action. But they evidently thought that such extremities would not have to be faced -- and they miscalculated.